

ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SUSTAINABILITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 22 MARCH 2012

PRESENT:- Councillors Peter Heaton-Jones (Chair), Mark Dempsey (Vice-Chair), Junab Ali, Mike Bawden, Sinead Darker, Emma Faramarzi, Richard Hurley, Anthony Peake, Vera Tomlinson and Steve Wakefield.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Stan Pajak.

27. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting. No declarations were made.

28. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 26th January 2012, be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Matters Arising

Regeneration report – the Chair advised that this would be circulated to Members once it had been completed and would be submitted to the Cabinet in the next Municipal Year.

Recycling – the Chair advised that Cabinet had requested a full report on recycling. Members of the Committee welcomed the report to Cabinet and recommended that this Committee should consider recycling as part of their 2012/13 work programme.

Up-adopted back alleys – the chair reported that Councillor Pajak had appeared in the Evening Advertiser but, in Councillor Pajak's absence, was unsure as to what progress had been made. The Chair asked that Councillor Pajak pursue this issue if he was to be a Member of this Committee during the 2012/13 Municipal Year.

29. Public Question Time

No public questions were received during the meeting.

30. Inward Investment

The Chair explained that this was the second meeting of this Committee to take evidence on the topic of Inward Investment and thanked all those Members who had submitted their views following the last meeting. A number of guests had been invited to attend this meeting to participate in a question and answer session relating to Inward Investment and the Chair welcomed them to the meeting and asked them for their views on Inward Investment in Swindon.

Nicky Alberry (Chair of Influence, formerly Swindon Strategic Economic Partnership)

Nicky explained that Economic Partnerships had been set up 5/6 years ago and that targets were established within Local Area Agreements. Swindon Borough Council had attracted additional funding through meeting its targets and had agreed that this money should be spent on economic development. Responsibilities had changed over the last 12 months and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP's) were set up in 2011 to re-focus activity on bringing all agencies together to ensure that work was undertaken collectively. The role of Influence was to work with public sector agencies to create a better economic environment for the town and to work with Forward Swindon as the principle agency for economic development.

Ian Piper (Forward Swindon)

Ian gave a brief presentation outlining how Forward Swindon would measure its success in attracting new business into Swindon. It was envisaged that the promotion of the campaign and the development of the Business Investment Service would increase the number of enquiries and ultimately improve the success rates. Some of the campaign measures included improving awareness of Swindon and developing local business advocates.

James Lockhart (Whitmarsh Lockhart, Commercial Agents)

James reported that his role has been to market property to buyers and that networking and liaising with other agents helps to create a market place. He added that in the 1980's, a number of big enquiries would come into the town on a regular basis but that he had received just the one recently. Whilst Swindon could be described as a tired, lacklustre town, James described it as diamond covered in dust and added that Forward Swindon had a major role in increasing positive awareness of Swindon. As a member of the Board of Forward Swindon, James reported that the newly advertised post of Inward Investment Director would be absolutely vital in proactively selling the town.

Peter Bearfoot (Alder King, Commercial Agents)

Peter stated that he had come to Swindon in 1979 and had dealt with companies of all different sizes. He added that Swindon Borough Council had a significant role to play with some companies, but not all, and that the skill sets needed to be available should they be required. He felt that Inward Investment centred around the availability of land for development and that this needed to be addressed and made publicly available.

James Gregory (Alder King, Commercial Agents)

James agreed with the comments already made and added that there was a definite need for ambassadors within the town and that everyone needed to work together to achieve the end goal and in making it clear that Swindon was 'open for business'.

Giles Weir (Lang La Salle, Commercial Agents)

Giles stated that any investment depended upon people's perception of the town and that he would like to see better integration with the commercial agents as this was where initial enquiries usually commenced.

In response to questions from Members of the Committee, the following issues were raised:-

- The requirement for top flight place marketing in order to change the perceived image of Swindon. This has to be led by Swindon Borough Council, through Forward Swindon. This would take a while to implement but there was a lot of good will and effort put in by the business community in promoting the town.
- The perception survey undertaken by Forward Swindon indicated that that there was not a lot of negativity about Swindon but more a lack of knowledge about the town. There was therefore a need to promote positive messages about the town.
- Good opportunity to come together and support the Forward Swindon campaign. More could be achieved by pooling resources and working together to sell the town.
- The potential success of the Oasis development would have a significant impact upon Inward Investment into the town.
- Need to focus upon growing businesses such as the automotive sector and distribution.
- Better communication between Planning Officers and Commercial Agents has enabled progress to be made and agents have been involved in the core strategy process. Those agents present stated that they would not have attended this type of meeting 12 months ago but now felt that things were moving forward and that they were very much involved in this process.
- The formation of Forward Swindon as an interface between the private sector and the Council was an essential conduit that had been missing for a number of years.
- Limited resources were now being deployed quite sensibly.
- Mixed messages regarding a particular development area can have negative consequences and the press also have a role to play in changing people's perceptions of Swindon.
- There was a need for a clear vision for the town and it was important to move forward together. There were areas for promotion that would not cost too much, such as the public realm.
- The South West Investment Group meet regularly to look at market trends and Forward Swindon can help to bridge the gap between the agents and the Council in assisting in areas such as the planning process.
- There was currently no major site available for development thereby reducing any chance of success. There was a need for a range and different sizes of sites available in order to entertain more enquiries. A potential occupier requires deliverability, not hurdles.
- The Forward Swindon campaign was to be launched in the next few weeks and it was important that all agencies supported this campaign.

Resolved – (1) That those representatives present be thanked for attending the meeting and responding to questions from Members of the Committee.

(2) That the Economic, Environmental and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Committee be recommended to continue to work on Inward Investment with a view to completing a full report as part of their work programme for 2012/13.

(3) The Chair thanked the Members and Officers for their support and input over the last year.